

SHAWN MILLER

Mrs. Stein's Tin Box

The sky was in a golden blaze from the setting sun. Its fading rays gave the last direct light against the colored leaves of autumn. The last shafts of sunlight had already left the large sitting room of the home. The sound of birds, soon to leave, could be heard through the large screened windows. Not far away, a boy was hurriedly cutting a lawn before he lost all light. Occasionally, a gentle breeze drifted in, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass. There was a nip to the air, not felt since winter. It concealed itself in the warm breeze that drifted into the room. Somewhere in the crowded room, a man moaned softly in an attempt to speak. A woman, dressed in white, drifted noiselessly across the room on white crepe-soled shoes. She went to the window and, with some effort, closed it. Now that the sounds of the world had been hushed everyone became more aware of the dry music that had been playing ceaselessly since morning. Speakers were located in the ceilings over congregation points. The room was furnished with plush chairs and couches. Huge, ornate lamps provided little light where they sat on cumbersome tables. A few personal touches were added to the room or hung on the institution-green walls to give things a homey look. Railings protruded from the walls on all four sides. One old woman, a giddy mirror of her former self, stood clutching the railing for minutes, her dress only half buttoned. She had a purposeless look as she slowly turned her head from side to side, methodically licking her lips. One of the younger women, dressed in white, approached the old woman.

“Come, Mrs. Sacks, we must get ready. Our visitors are coming. Now let’s button up.” The old woman, almost as if she were in slow motion, looked down at her dress. She began to raise her arm, but the younger woman buttoned her dress. “There,” she said. She smiled and walked away. The old woman, with an uneasy sway, returned to the railing and clutched it again.

The music softened a little as a voice said, “Ladies and gentlemen, our visitors will soon be arriving. If you are having any difficulty, raise your hand and one of the nurses will be glad to help you.” The music again filled the room. Many of the residents talked quietly, laughing at funny stories and the men joked about the nurses they could never enjoy. Others listlessly gazed at the sunset or passively watched the nurses. As they sat there, suddenly, men, women and children entered the room. With nervous laughs they greeted aunts, uncles and parents, many of whom they had had committed. All added hesitant phrases like, “You’re looking good” or “what beautiful color you have in your cheeks!” An old man moaned angrily as his son wheeled him away from his place, while another woman giggled senselessly at the sight of her grandchildren. Boys and girls, too young to understand, cried or ran, in fright, from grandparents. The room was thrown into the confusion that occurred every visiting hour. The nurses patrolled the room for signs of abuse. Unattended children pulled at clothing or played noisily with toys they had

concealed. Residents would convulse or try to eat foods without removing the wrappings. The confused visitors would look pleadingly for a nurse. One of the circulating nurses went among the residents tucking blankets and straightening robes. Near the large window sat a majestic old woman. Her figure, though slight, was still trim. Her face still possessed the fine features of a younger woman and her gray-blue eyes sparkled with life.

“Hello, Mrs. Stein, are you comfortable?”

“Yes,” she replied tucking her blanket closer around herself. The nurse, seeing a small tin box in her lap asked, “Would you like me to take that box and put it in a safe place?”

“No, I brought it out because I want it.”

“All right, Mrs. Stein, but I hope you don’t lose it.”

“No, I won’t,” was her determined reply.

The nurse walked away shaking her head. Most of the nurses considered Mrs. Stein one of the difficult persons to handle, but all treated her with a respect that only a few residents enjoyed. Most patients had become senile, losing part or most of their sanity. The few who hadn’t were respected and dreaded. They knew too well how their bodies, once strong and active, were slowly giving way. The senile were afflicted with their child-like life. In many cases, they had submitted to voluntary mental suicide that let them tolerate parties with nursery rhymes and heavy sedatives. A few, like Mrs. Stein, sat patiently talking about their lives and their very uncertain future. The apathy of old age took its toll as these individuals drifted into senility. Mrs. Stein turned slowly and scanned the room with her ancient eyes. Old men sat in their wheel chairs, dull-eyed with heavy heads propped up by one arm. An old woman, her face a grotesque sag, sat quietly. Martha Whitman sat in a corner with a small group of children playing around her. Mrs. Stein wished she could talk to her. She almost raised her hand to summon a nurse when, with great disappointment, she saw the same lost expression on Martha’s face. She had seen other friends who had changed over the past few months. Only a few remained alert, among them, many newcomers she had not met. She had noted how many newcomers would drift into senility soon after arriving. Mrs. Stein knew that she, too, would succumb. She had experienced lapses of memory, while at other times, she recalled things that had happened to her as a very young child; all of which, she thought she had forgotten. The present, at times, seemed nonexistent; names and faces were harder to remember.

“Mrs. Stein,” a nurse said, disturbing her thoughts, “would you like to sit somewhere else?”

She turned to the nurse and said, “No, I’m fine.”

“I thought you might like to talk to Mrs. Danby.” She motioned to the woman in the wheel chair that she was pushing.

“Oh, hello, Dorothy,” Mrs. Stein said with surprise. “How do you feel after your trip to the hospital?”

Mrs. Danby turned her head and with an absent look returned the greeting.

“Nurse, I’d like to sit alone for a while.”

“All right, dear, but you shouldn’t be by yourself too much. Can I take care of that box for you, honey?”

“I told the other nurse I want the box with me.”

“All right,” the nurse said, “But I hope you don’t forget it.” Mrs. Danby was gone too, she thought. They had been good friends for a long time. Dorothy Danby had entered the home not long after Mrs. Stein. It had been Dorothy who had convinced her that staying in her home alone for the rest of her life was bad. She had enjoyed the company of an old friend. Lately, Dorothy had been in the hospital and, now, she was gone, too.

As the evening wore on, Mrs. Stein became tired. She overheard a boy tell his mother, “I can’t imagine that these old people were ever young.” Mrs. Stein smiled when she heard him. She looked down at her box. She was feeling weaker and finally she had to be brought to her room. While visiting hours continued, Audrey Stein died.

The home was quiet now with all residents in bed. The music that played endlessly was off now. All that could be heard was the quiet rumbling of the air system. One of the nurses sat at her station filling out the death report of Mrs. Stein. She was a new staff member and felt uneasy filling out the report of a dead woman; she checked the short list of possessions. A few clothes, some mementos and a tin box were all she owned. The nurse took the box and opened it carefully. The box smelled musty. Inside were several papers and other items. Leafing through them she found a lock of brown hair bound with a red string, several old stamps and coins and a locket with the engraving, “Beauty Contest Winner — 1920 — Atlantic City.” The nurse opened the locket and found a tiny picture of a beautiful woman with dark brown hair and a solid chin. Putting the locket aside, she took from the box several photographs. Fascinated with the old pictures, she looked at the faces. One photograph caught her eye. It was of a family standing in front of a stately old house. She recognized the youthful figure of Mrs. Stein. On the back was printed, “The family —1935.” Several photographs showed the children at different ages. Other pictures were of grandchildren. The nurse saw the figure of Mrs. Stein posing at many places around the world. The final photograph, dated 1965, was another family portrait taken in front of the same house as before. The nurse compared it to the earlier picture. The trees were much larger in the second picture and the house showed some wear, but it was the same house. Now, instead of four children with parents, there were ten couples with fourteen children. In the center stood Mr. and Mrs. Stein. The proud older woman was radiant. Her expression caused the nurse to think: “A trouble maker, proud and stubborn.” The nurse could recall snatches of Mrs. Stein’s biography. Remembering it, she went to the file where all residents’ biographies were kept and found the one she wanted. Mrs. Stein was admitted in 1970, a year after the death of her husband. She had four children, twelve grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. The cities in which her children lived ranged from Phoenix to Paris. The nurse put the biography aside and

began to write the next-of-kin notification when she noticed a paper she had missed in Mrs. Stein's tin box. She opened it and read:

June 24, 1915

My life lies ahead of me now with so much to see and do. I feel I want to travel. A fifteen year old girl doesn't stand much chance to leave her state or town. But, someday when I read this letter again, I hope my dreams will come true, to travel, be known, live a long, happy life and even though it's hard to imagine, so far off, die in dignity, like my grandmother did, as she slept. I can only pray God will be good; I will find a good man and I will have good children.

Sincerely,
Audrey

P.S.: I got my first bathing suit today! I hope it doesn't look too bad.

WAYNE DODD

*You Are Tired and Desperate: Nothing Is Working.
So You Decide to Write a Formula Poem.*

First, forget everything important.
Try to remember something from highschool chemistry class, say a moment of total incompatibility.
Let this stand for the beginning of a new solution.

None of this, you say, adds up.
Now you are ready for the next step.
Take away everything left over, especially former times and familiar places.
This is very important.
You will not be given another chance.

Here you may discover that you are good at arithmetic. Divide and conquer, multiply and possess the earth. At this point draw a line down the middle of the page, like a lawyer in divorce court.

Listen carefully to rain in early morning.
Try not to think of endings.

You must assume your life and writing are getting better with every move.